

Students develop portable ramp for wheelchair users



Third year mechanical engineering students John Joe Finn (left) and Alan Divilly with their wheelchair ramp at NUI Galway.

BY CHRISTINA
MCDONALD LEGG

Two students at NUI Galway have designed a mobile wheelchair ramp for people with disabilities at the Irish Pilgrimage Trust (IHCPT). Alan Divilly and John Joe Finn, students of the Mechanical Engineering Programme, are getting an extra dose in community engagement during their third year on the course.

Together the students have developed a project to build a fold up wheelchair ramp for disabled people. Initially proposing the project in October 2005, the pair have worked since then on the design and development of the wheelchair ramp. Both students began researching what wheelchair users would need as part of a Service Learning module for their course that was developed in partnership with the Community Knowledge Ini-

tiative at NUI Galway to give students practical skills from their courses.

CAIRDE, Community Awareness Initiatives Responsibility Directed by Engineers, is a module that was designed by Professor Abhay Pandit in 2003 as a way for students to identify a need in their community and define a project with very distinct goals.

"It is more real-life experience that students can gain and can see their need and their usefulness in the community," Professor Pandit said. "I am trying to use tools that they are used to, but underlining it with access to the community."

According to Professor Pandit, the module helps show students how engineers make

abled access to modern buildings, John and Alan found that there are still many situations that are encountered by wheelchair-bound young people today.

The design that John and Alan created enables the ramp to be both portable and lightweight, in order to be easily stored in a car and carried by a carer accompanying a wheelchair-bound person. Compact and made of aluminium, the ramp is simple, yet convenient. Manufacturing of the wheelchair ramp was sponsored and completed by Fahy Engineering, Athenry.

Fahy Engineering undertook the project free of charge, sponsoring the material and labour hours in order to help the project be finished for the

future to suggest possible improvements and developments that could be made to the ramp.

"The fact that this is so light and portable that it can fit in the boot of a car, I have no doubt that this portable ramp could become an invaluable piece of equipment for families and organisations dealing with disability," Ciaran Cannon, Chief Executive of IHCPT said.

Although there are serious efforts to make all buildings accessible for disabled people, it is still not possible in some older buildings due to architecture or unusually high footpaths. According to Cannon, this wheelchair ramp, due to its aluminium frame and portable nature, will help address this issue.

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Clonberne Sportsfield Development Project

...to their commu-
nities as well as helps them to
meet and interact with people
from different backgrounds in
a role of service. He adamantly
believes that service to soci-
ety and within community
should be a part of what stu-
dents do.

"As a university we have a
duty to engage students with
the community and to create
students that give to the com-
munity," Professor Pandit said.
"We need to teach them so
that we can distinguish them
as different from other univer-
sities so that when they go into
jobs, their CV will show that
something extra."

Throughout this module,
John and Alan have worked on
the design to build a wheel-
chair ramp for IHCPT. They
approached representatives
from the IHCPT, a national
charity caring for young peo-
ple with special needs, and dis-
cussed what developments the
ramp would need. Even with
the great improvements in dis-

...Pilgrimage's Trust
"This project brought a dif-
ferent element and a different
aspect to looking at engineer-
ing," Alan Divilly said.
"Because we have to go out
and contact people and find
out what they need, we got the
more practical aspect of it."

The prototype of the ramp
will be used for the IHCPT's
pilgrimage to Lourdes this
Easter and one will also be
kept in the specially-adapted
minibus in Kilcuan.

The IHCPT is a registered
charity in Ireland caring for
young people with special
needs. Each Easter, the
IHCPT offers over 500 young
people and six hundred adult
carers an opportunity to travel
to Lourdes. Additionally, the
IHCPT owns a holiday home
called Kilcuan in Clarinbridge,
Galway where over 500 dis-
abled young people from all
over Ireland go.

Plans have been made
between the IHCPT and John
and Alan to meet again in

Alan and John presented
their project and findings,
along with their classmates, at
a poster presentation for the
Mechanical Engineering Pro-
gramme in the Arts Millenni-
um Building.

"Doing this was something
new that we've never done
before," John Joe Finn said.
"We were actually making use
of what we learned in college."

In building the ramp, the
students learned how to work
within their field for the good
of the community. Combining
classroom with community
and theory with practice, this
service learning module, spon-
sored by the Community
Knowledge Initiative at NUI
Galway, a venture to connect
students with their communi-
ty through practical work, has
shown students the good that
community engagement does
for a less advantaged portion
of society.

"This wasn't just for the
grades," John Joe said. "It was
to help someone."

...and more
to offer the patient a conven-
and - on the face of it - seem
rapidly around the country
include treatments for m
skin infections, uncomple
certain circumstances. Th

occur"

Unless legislation is intro-
duced that sets out the
maintained

...on the
playing fields in New
castle.